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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Office of Current Intelligence
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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Individuals and Cliques in South Vietnam

1. The abortive coup of 19 February and the successful counteraction, which nevertheless accomplished the coup's major purpose of removing General Khanh, have left serious scars on the South Vietnamese body politic. The anti-Buddhist, pro-Catholic, and even pro-Diem overtones of the coup group have probably sharpened religious divisions, with the Catholics more desperate because of the coup's failure, and the Buddhists more wary that Khanh's ouster by itself reflects military, and even US, hostility toward them. Moreover, Khanh's departure with no specific heir to the leadership of the military, merely opens up new opportunities for numerous aspirants to the role of military strongman. The prospects of achieving even a reasonably stable or effective government in the near future remain exceedingly slim.

2. The unfilled power vacuum left by Diem's overthrow has encouraged shifting alliances and temporary marriages of convenience in the scramble of long-time "outs" to bring about conditions favoring their own fortunes. Any prospect that Khanh's departure from the Saigon scene will permit the armed forces to unite under more stable leadership seems unlikely without further power struggles. Some probable contenders are discussed below.

a. General Tran Van "Little" Minh. His appointment as "acting commander in chief" is on the surface pro-officer or clique feels ready to bid for power. Minh lacks any strong support among his colleagues. He was loosely identified in the past with generals of Minh's junta. His Catholicism is a further drawback. His private distaste for the more flamboyant of the "young Turks"--Generals Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Chanh Thi--would probably bring him into conflict with them even if these two were not already pushing their own political ambitions

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b. General Nguyen Chanh Thi. Commander of politically turbulent I Corps since last fall, and additionally titled "Commander of the Capital Liberation Forces" since the quashing of the 19 February coup attempt, Thi has been increasingly asserting his influence since the military decision to remove Khanh. Thi took over last-minute leadership of the abortive paratroop coup against Diem in November 1960 and fled with 18 of the coup group into exile until Diem's overthrow three years later. Some of the group ultimately cast in their lot with the Viet Cong, but Thi is not known to have done so. He is, however, an erratic and unpredictable officer of some political talent. He is widely distrusted because of his obvious efforts to link himself with Buddhist power in the northern provinces which I Corps controls and because of his opportunism. Thi, who now appears to be spokesman for the Armed Forces Council, is rapidly building himself a base of national power by pressing a purge of Khanh supporters and installing his own followers in key police and military posts.

c. General Nguyen Cao Ky. Ky, still in his early 30s, became commander of the air force after Khanh ousted the Minh junta. His prominence stems from the considerable loyalty he commands from combat pilots, among whom he is one of the most experienced and most "gung ho." Ky's command of the air force made him instrumental in rescuing Khanh from the abortive 13 September coup, and, until Ky changed his mind, from that of 19-20 February. Before these events, however, Ky had become one of the most prominent of the so-called "young Turks" who emerged in the wake of Khanh's clumsy attempt to acquire dictatorial powers last August. Tying their fortunes at least momentarily to Khanh, and cognizant of the Buddhist clamor for a sweep of Diemist remnants, the young Turks--including Thi and other aspirants to senior rank--styled themselves as revolutionaries, bent on purging the military Old Guard. In this they included "Big" Minh and company, as well as Catholic, Dai Viet, and Can Lao officers then gaining prominence. Ky, like Thi, is flamboyant and probably overconfident of his political skill, but he appears somewhat more wary of the Buddhist leadership. Although currently cooperating with Thi's power moves, Ky may eventually be at loggerheads with Thi or any other figure who attempts to pick up Khanh's mantle, if only because he sees himself in this role.

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d. General Nguyen Van Thieu. Deputy premier and defense minister, Thieu has a capable field command record and considerable military and civilian support for a more prominent military or political role. His major, and self-acknowledged, drawbacks are his Catholicism and his ties with the Dai Viet Party, both of which could provoke serious Buddhist opposition. Thieu emerged as one of the key military leaders after Diem's overthrow, and he may have played an active role in the Khanh coup against "Big" Minh's junta, through which the southern faction of the Dai Viet Party hoped to gain real control. There have been some indications that Thieu, although overtly uninvolved in subsequent coup attempts, may have been tacitly in sympathy with them. Thieu's recent remarks that "Little" Minh's command is "provisional" and his statements that Thi can probably be controlled, suggest that he may be promoting the cause of officers such as General Khiem, ambassador to the US, or General Co of II Corps, if not his own.

e. General Tran Thien Khiem. Kheim, who evidently played a prominent behind-the-scenes role in both the overthrow of Diem and of the Minh junta increasingly appeared to be trying to call the shots during Khanh's premiership, when he was himself commander in chief. Although evidently ambitious and opportunistic, Khiem--who with Khanh rescued Diem from the 1960 coup attempt--has until now shied away from seeking power openly, but he evidently is still in the wings. Khiem was exiled to his present post as ambassador in Washington after serving as one of the top triumvirate with Khanh and "Big" Minh last summer. He has denied being a Dai Viet Party member, but he has been close to Thieu and the September and February coup groups, and may have instigated the latest attempt. Although a Buddhist, Khiem is suspicious and critical of the Buddhist hierarchy, and enjoys Catholic support; [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Although Khiem may be partially discredited for his open endorsement of last week's abortive coup, he may hope that developments which could curb Buddhist power would pave the way for his own take-over. He is reported to have relied frequently on the political judgments of Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao, who apparently organized the coup attempt.

f. General Nguyen Huu Co. Co, as commander of II Corps in central Vietnam, is now in charge of one of

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the most rapidly deteriorating areas in the country. Co is a Buddhist, but has displayed marked suspicion of possible Communist penetration of the Buddhist leadership, and is more closely associated with the conservative military generals than with the "young Turk" element. Co has been frequently mentioned as a possible choice for commander in chief, although he has so far played a relatively neutral political role and his political ties and supporters, if any, are still unknown.

g. General Pham Van Dong. Dong, military governor of the Saigon area since last fall, and reportedly just concurrently named director of the Central Intelligence Organization, has only indirectly hinted that he was interested in leadership of the military. Although he is older than the "young Turk" group, he has been frequently lumped with them despite the fact that he displays little sympathy with them. He may already be running into friction with Thi over authority in the Saigon area. Dong, a tough officer who claims Nung ancestry, is a nominal Buddhist, but is obviously close to Catholic circles and was a strong supporter of the Huong regime. Although he is unlikely to emerge as a strong man in his own right, he could play a leading role in influencing future developments.

h. General Tran Van Don. In retirement as a result of "young Turk" pressures, Don is the only member of the former Minh junta who might be reinstated in some position of responsibility. He was rumored to be a supporter of the February coup attempt; if so, he was probably motivated more by bitterness at Khanh than by sympathy for the coup leaders. In general, although "Big" Minh himself might conceivably be restored to some honorific post, the future of his ousted junta--including Don himself, Mai Huu Xuan, and Le Van Kim--appears likely to be one of intrigue with other factions. General Ton That Dinh, the only member still on active duty, is politically ambitious but distrusted as erratic and demagogic, and is likely to be kept on the shelf.

i. Leaders of the abortive September and February coups. Officers such as General Lam Van Phat and Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao have been stripped of command and are likely to return to prominence only behind another figure such as Kheim or Thieu. While they are still at large, however, they may retain some support, particularly among Catholic and southern Dai Viet elements, and could plot yet another coup.

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3. Although there seems to be no immediate challenge to the Quat government, its fortunes are to a considerable degree dependent on what individual or faction holds military power, as well as on the extent of Buddhist, and even Catholic, cooperation. Quat's cabinet is composed of technicians and a group of civilian politicians. Many of the latter have been closely associated in the past. The cabinet's status is discussed here in the light of those political groupings which remain.

a. Northern faction of the Dai Viet Party. Phan Huy Quat and some members of his cabinet such as Bui Diem represent the northern faction of the Dai Viet Party, and have no known ties with any military elements. Quat's personal strength, and even his broader attitudes, are still somewhat untested and unknown, although he has been considered over the years a prominent and moderate opposition figure. He seems to enjoy at least temporary Buddhist acceptance, possibly because his supporters have sought to win Buddhist support since the Buddhists first moved openly against Diem. Quat is a Buddhist, but he is not known to have strong ties with the Buddhist hierarchy. It is possible that both the Buddhists and the military have endorsed him in the belief that he can be controlled.

b. Southern faction of the Dai Viet Party. Nguyen Ton Hoan, leader of the southern faction, is again in exile, as he has been almost continuously since the early 1950s. His attempts to build up his own party following as Khanh's Vice Premier and pacification minister led to his latest eclipse, and it is no longer certain that pro-Dai Viet officers such as General Thieu would again call on Hoan to head a government if they came to power. Hoan, considered a strong nationalist and anti-Communist, was not effective while in office, but attributed this to Khanh's efforts to bypass him.

c. Central faction of the Dai Viet Party. Ha Thuc Ky, a leader of the central faction, was Khanh's first interior minister, but was quickly removed on grounds of intriguing. Although closer to Hoan's than to Quat's faction, Ky now seems to have close ties with neither. He recently denied any involvement in coup plotting, but seems aware of the 19-20 February plans, and may have been a supporter.

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d. Nationalist Party (VNQDD). Tran Van Tuyen, a nominal leader of the VNQDD, is a vice premier in the Quat cabinet and represents the northern region where the party strength lies. Tuyen, for a long period associated with Quat and similar political opponents of Diem who were able to remain in Saigon, probably exercises little real control in the VNQDD, which is to some extent split among rival provincial factions. Elements of the VNQDD have variously been cooperating with and in conflict with the Buddhists in the northern provinces. Nguyen Hoa Hiep, a leader of the southern branch of the VNQDD, is Quat's interior minister, but is an elderly figure of almost no political strength.

4. More important than the political parties themselves are the Buddhist and Catholic communities, and to a lesser extent the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects in the delta. Although the religious organizations are ostensibly nonpolitical, their leaders exert great influence on political events. None of the religious groups, however, is in itself monolithic.

a. Buddhists, Central Faction. Thich Tri Quang, although holding only a spiritual title in the Buddhist hierarchy, is the most powerful Buddhist figure, primarily because he commands the militant Buddhists of central Vietnam (i.e., the northern provinces of South Vietnam). He is by far the most effective Buddhist political strategist, but evidently prefers to exert his influence indirectly from behind the scenes. He is a skilled tactician able to manipulate his followers to apply overt, mass pressure. Tri Quang's views and aims are basically still unknown; his possible Viet Cong ties have been examined at length but never established. At times, he has displayed greater restraint and moderation than other Buddhist leaders. Quang's closest cohort is Thich Thien Minh, director of Buddhist youth programs and official Buddhist spokesman. Another leading monk, Huyen Quang, is reported in Quang's camp. This group appears to be moving toward an openly espoused neutralism but still veils its goals in obscure language.

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b. Buddhists, Southern Faction. Thich Tam Chau, the monk who heads the Buddhist secular organization, is the most prominent leader of Buddhists in the southern provinces, a group which includes the mass of Buddhist refugees from North Vietnam. Tam Chau has in the past been described as a moderate, but has been more open than Tri Quang in attempting to dabble in politics. Chau has at times sponsored movements to unite the various religious factions, particularly in the southern provinces; at times he has appeared in close alliance with General Khanh. The extent to which his views and actions are coordinated with Tri Quang is uncertain, but there is evident rivalry between the two. Chau, like Quang, is reported recently to have spoken of the need for ending the war, although he speaks of keeping the South non-Communist. Although he had also been accused of Communist ties, Chau is described by most Vietnamese as anti-Communist. He may be close to Thich Tam Giao, head of the Buddhist chaplain corps. Some of his followers lower in the hierarchy have been erratic, troublesome hotheads.

c. Southern Catholics. Archbishop Nguyen Van Binh, leader of the Catholic community in Saigon, is a moderate and is widely respected even among Buddhists. A quiet critic of Diem, Binh has since Diem's downfall indicated some concern over Buddhist intentions, and has been as reluctant to cooperate openly with Quat's government as he was with Khanh's. He remains, however, a generally constructive and unifying figure, with considerable ability to influence events.

d. Northern Catholics. Father Hoang Quynh is the best known representative of the Catholic militants, centered around the nearly 800,000 Catholic refugees who fled Communist North Vietnam. Although Quynh and other stanch militants such as Father Mai Huu Khue do not speak for the refugees as a bloc, they are often the most vocal and potentially troublesome Catholic element. Both men appear to have supported the abortive February coup, the failure of which may make them feel even more threatened and desperate. Quynh reportedly has spoken of arming his followers in the past.

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e. Hoa Hao. Luong Trong Tuong, the politician usually considered to speak for the Hoa Hao sect, refused for reasons not now known to participate in the Quat government. The sect's real power, however, is centered far from Saigon in An Giang and Chau Doc provinces west of the Mekong, and its real loyalty is given to local leaders in the area, including the An Giang Province chief. To date, the Hoa Hao have cooperated militarily with Diem's successor regimes, and have exerted little influence on national political events.

f. Cao Dai. The Cao Dai, like the Hoa Hao, have given military support to Saigon since Diem's overthrow. However, there are more signs of dissatisfaction among them than among the Hoa Hao. Two of Quat's ministers, Tran Van Tuyen and Le Van Hoach, are Cao Dai, as is titular Chief of State Phan Khac Suu. None appears really to speak for the sect membership, although Hoach, who has claimed in the past to have made contacts and soundings among the Viet Cong, may have such contacts among Cao Dai in Tay Ninh Province, which is a stronghold of both the Cao Dai and the Viet Cong. The Tay Ninh Province chief, General Le Van Tat, is probably in fact the most prominent Cao Dai leader. A Cao Dai official, Tran Quang Vinh, has participated in the defunct High National Council and its successor.

5. Labor. Tran Quoc Buu, president of the Vietnamese Confederation of Labor (CTV), is a rather unique figure on the labor scene. Buu, although he privately gave support to the Huong regime, has been reluctant to assert himself politically. He is under attack within the CTV, particularly from its central Vietnam affiliates, and from Buddhist militants on grounds of his early association with Diem and of his alleged corruption. Although there are some other capable labor leaders, including Vo Van Tai, the CTV leader in Saigon, many of these are political unknowns. Several union leaders are unsavory opportunists. The unions themselves are prime targets of Viet Cong penetration. Most union members have remained politically apathetic and have displayed almost no real support for any government in Saigon to date.

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